CHAPTER XLI

THE ARMING OF MERCHANT VESSELS

THE carrying of guns during wartime by merchantmen engaged in commerce is a very old practice. Indeed, formerly it was usual for large ships to carry guns in times of peace, as a protection against pirates. In the Napoleonic wars, most British ships carried guns to defend themselves against French privateers, which took the seas as commerce raiders in considerable numbers after the defeat of Trafalgar had finally crushed the naval power of France.

During the Great War, the practice of putting guns on merchant ships was only gradually developed. We were short of guns for our fighting forces. The Admiralty began with the arming of some of the vessels engaged on more important work such as bringing of supplies from America, and in the course of 1915, the provision of guns for merchantmen was steadily developed, so far as guns were available. But the heavy demands of the Army for guns left the supply for shipping very scanty, and as German air-raids developed, the provision of anti-aircraft guns was given priority over other claims for the smaller types of gun. The guns supplied to the merchant ships were mostly of a type which the Army in the field could best spare.